

which, in my opinion, in the last 4 years has been less than what our farmers deserve. It is time now to give them some predictability and some understanding of where their Government is going to be for them.

It has been said the only constant is change, and that certainly has been true with our national farm policy. For the last 4 years or better, farmers—certainly Arkansas farmers—have harvested their crops without knowing if they would be able to afford to plant another crop in the following growing season. They had no predictability, no understanding of whether their Government was going to be for them.

As they looked at what was happening in the global economy with the fact that the European Union was consuming well over 80 percent of export subsidies worldwide, they said they were not competing with other farmers across the globe.

Our farmers are competing with other governments. Where has their Government been in terms of a solid agricultural policy they can depend on, particularly when they go to their financial institutions to get the backing they need to put seed in the ground?

Of course, many remember that Congress passed the Freedom to Farm Act back in 1996. For farmers in Arkansas, Freedom to Farm has been a disaster because they depended too much on the ability to be able to negotiate trade. We put our farmers in a position where, as we said we were going to ratchet down the Government support and the Government safety net, were they going to have to depend on the market.

We gave them flexibility. Flexibility was great, but flexibility without the backbone in trade does them no good, particularly in a time when we are seeing record lows in commodity prices.

Farmers are getting paid right now the same they were being paid in the early 1940s, and yet their input costs are the highest they have ever been. They are making the same they were in 1940 when a combine probably cost them about \$15,000 to \$25,000, and now they are paying anywhere from \$180,000 to \$200,000 for a combine.

Arkansas farmers and farmers around the country have been in limbo year after year, waiting for Congress to pass emergency spending bills. The existing farm policy is absolutely inadequate. A farmer cannot just go to the banker and say, I think Congress is going to provide us an emergency spending bill this year so you need to make sure you go ahead and give me that loan and maybe wait for another 9 to 12 months to find out whether or not it will be backed by the Government.

As has the senior member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, I have worked with my colleagues on that committee to write a bill this year, to get out of the Agriculture Committee a good, positive, and comprehensive bill

to address the needs of our farmers. I have been increasingly concerned and dismayed as the Senate rushes to complete its business by the end of the year that farmers again will be left behind. That is why, again, I was so proud to see the majority leader come to the floor today to say we are going to take up a farm bill on the Senate floor.

The Senate Agriculture Committee, under the leadership of Chairman HARKIN, has done its work to come up with a good bill that is comprehensive, that will provide the safety net, as well as far-reaching, new, and innovative issues we need in a farm bill. They have done their job. We will bring it up on the floor.

The House has done their job in passing a bill. We can compromise on these bills because they have been created in a way that they have many similarities. We can get a bill to the desk of the President this year so our farmers, once again, do not have to go into the new year with the uncertainty and the complete unpredictability of not knowing where their Government will be.

The Senate must pass this bill before we adjourn for the year because it is imperative, as the farmers go into this next planting season, they have something they can bank on, one with a solid safety net that ensures not only the financial viability of our farmers but also the viability of local bankers, merchants, seed dealers, fertilizer dealers, implement dealers, and rural institutions that depend on the stability our farmers provide.

The Senate bill also provided much needed funding for rural development and nutrition programs for disadvantaged families to help those parts of our Nation where the needs are the greatest. An unbelievable conservation title helps in new and innovative ways, placing the resources and efforts into proven conservation practices that our farmers know they can use to mitigate those marginal lands on which it is more costly to produce. It includes funding for research and development to ensure that America remains a technological and economic powerhouse in the coming century. It provides funding for forestry, biofuel development, and credit financing programs to guarantee sound farm financing.

The economy in this great Nation is in a delicate state. There is nothing that we can do here that will guarantee we will not go into a recession. But there is one thing we can do that will absolutely guarantee a recession. We have seen it in our history's past. That is that we allow the rural economy to collapse. If that rural economy collapses, we will be assured not only of a recession but much greater problems in our economy in coming years.

I applaud the majority leader for bringing up the issues on which we have worked. We have worked out the

details. It will be of great assistance to the American people, particularly in rural America. As we begin with a farm bill that will be a great stimulus package to rural America, we can also work out the details of an economic stimulus package that will be comprehensive in helping workers in transition and also provide the tax relief that industries need, particularly small businesses, to be able to grow and thrive and increase a growing economy.

I hope that in the several days we have ahead of us and the work there is yet to be done we can continue along the road that the majority leader has paved for us in putting out these issues, that we can get some agreement that will be beneficial to the American people, and that we can all go home at the end of these 2 weeks to a holiday and know we have done our very best. That is what we owe to the people.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THOMAS. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent the order for the quorum call be dispensed with.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. THOMAS. I ask unanimous consent to speak for 5 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### THE SENATE AGENDA

Mr. THOMAS. Madam President, I have listened this morning to the conversations on the floor. I think it is appropriate that we have had some discussion about what we are going to do in the remaining time before us. I hope we can come to a little more of a cooperative understanding of what our agenda should be in the next 2 weeks. What are the things that are most important? What are the things we ought to have as our priorities?

Obviously, we have to finish the appropriations, and we have only sent about half of those to the White House. So that is something we must do. Obviously, there is difficulty in trying to complete the work on the Defense appropriations.

It seems to me it is also important that we have a stimulus package. However, having been on the Finance Committee and sat through all the talk about it, we expanded it far beyond where anyone would suggest these were stimulus programs. I suppose you could expect that to happen. We are at the end of a session. We are at a time when, because of the terrorist attacks, emergencies have arisen that must be addressed. But now we find that everyone who has ever had a thought about where we ought to be spending more money wants to do it. I think we have to be a little more thoughtful about where we are.